

Post 5/29/94



UPI/BETTMANN

Gen. Jose Bueso Rosa, convicted assassination plotter for whom Oliver North intervened.

A Favor for a Felon

Why Ollie North 'Cabaed Quietly' for a Jailed General

By Jefferson Morley and Murray Waas

IN THE fall of 1986, Oliver North sought to save a convicted felon from serving his federal prison sentence. The beneficiary of North's efforts was no common criminal. His name was Jose Bueso Rosa; he was a former Honduran general who had been actively involved in a failed 1984 plot to assassinate the president of Honduras—a plot that was to be funded by a \$10 million cocaine deal.

It sounded like a lurid "Miami Vice" plot to veteran newspaper reporters, but for Oliver North, then the deputy director of political military affairs at the National Security Council, it was just another day at the office. North insisted to colleagues that Bueso deserved special treatment because he had previously helped senior U.S. officials con-

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duct covert operations in support of the contra rebels fighting in Central America. After Bueso was sentenced to a five-year prison term in connection with the assassination plot, North waged a wide-ranging bureaucratic campaign in Washington to gain his freedom.

The story of North's efforts on behalf of Bueso is not just an obscure chapter in the Iran-contra scandal. Like shredding documents and misleading Congress in the name of defending American values, the leniency campaign for Bueso illuminates North's seeming inability to distinguish between his own political interests and the requirements of the law.

North, now a candidate for the Republican senatorial nomination in Virginia, presents himself as a candidate who is tough on crime, who favors the abolition of parole and who will zealously defend what he calls "traditional American values." His efforts to free a man who plotted with a convicted cocaine conspirator to kill a democratically elected

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head of state suggest a certain permissiveness in the way North puts his beliefs into action. In the Bueso case, as in other critical junctures in the Iran-contra scandal, North did not let concern about the niceties of the law interfere with the pursuit of his goals.

North declined to answer questions about the Bueso affair for this article. He spelled out his motivation for the leniency campaign on Sept. 17, 1986 in a White House electronic mail message to his boss, national security adviser John Poindexter. North expressed his concern that Bueso, if sent to prison, might "break his long-standing silence about the Nic[araguan] Resistance and other sensitive operations."

North then called together a host of senior Reagan administration officials to "cabal quietly," as he put it, on Bueso's behalf. His behind-the-scenes pressure did not save Bueso from prison, but it did succeed in getting him transferred to one of the most comfortable federal correctional facilities in the country. And Bueso, whom North feared might "start singing songs nobody wants to hear," never did speak out publicly about clandestine U.S. government operations in Central America.

Gen. Jose Abnego Bueso Rosa was, in Oliver North's words, a "friend of the United States" deserving of "reward." He was the chief of staff of the Honduran armed forces from 1982 to 1984, making him the second-ranking military officer in that Central American republic. At the time, Reagan administration officials were transforming Honduras, a sparsely populated agricultural republic, into a base for projecting U.S. military power throughout Central America.

Bueso's assistance to the U.S. government in the early 1980s was a closely guarded secret. Only three U.S. government officials "were fully aware of all that [Bueso] was doing on our behalf," according to a partially declassified memo written by North and obtained by the National Security Archive, a Washington research organization.

What covert operations Bueso and North worked on together is not known. In one of his NSC memos, North said Bueso "was the man with whom" he and other top officials "worked out arrangements . . ." The next three lines of the memo have been classified as top secret.

Bueso's admitted violations of U.S. law are not a secret. The FBI announced the indictment of Bueso and three other men in November 1984. The court proceedings that resulted in the conviction of all the defendants produced a detailed public record of the U.S. government's evidence about their scheme.

The affair began in July 1984. Bueso traveled to Miami where he joined four men in dis-

cussing a plot to kill the president of Honduras and take control of the government. An FBI agent posing as an assassin-for-hire infiltrated the plot and met Bueso at several meetings. The FBI also wiretapped conversations of all of the participants.

The plotter's target was Roberto Suazo, a wealthy conservative rancher who had been elected in 1981. Suazo, though generally supportive of U.S. policies in Central America, was regarded as a virtual communist by several of the plotters because the Honduran government had allegedly reneged on business deals with them.

Suazo was also no friend of Bueso's. Four months earlier, in March 1984, Suazo, under pressure from more nationalistic officers, had acquiesced in the purging of pro-American officers, including Bueso, from commanding positions in the Honduran armed forces.

North would later lobby for Bueso's freedom by claiming that the Honduran man was only tangentially involved in the assassination plotting. The evidence available to the U.S. government indicated otherwise.

Bueso participated in at least five meetings in the summer and fall of 1984 in which the assassination was discussed and planned, according to the affidavit of the lead FBI agent in the case and the wiretaps. At one meeting, Bueso told the conspirators that he did not want the assassination to be carried out prior to Nov. 15, 1984. According to an FBI affidavit, Bueso explained that a premature "hit" might cause the country to fall into the wrong hands. Bueso also knew about the hiring of the assassin. In early September 1984, he was present at a meeting where the conspirators swore a blood oath to carry out the assassination and the erstwhile hitman was paid \$20,000 in cash.

The plot, according to an FBI agent's sworn testimony and wiretaps submitted into the court record, was to be financed by a drug deal. In early Oct. 1984, Bueso's host in Miami, a Honduran businessman named Faiz Sikaffy, was overheard by the undercover FBI agent discussing a deal involving "fish." The FBI agents following the investigation believed that "fish" was actually a code word for narcotics. The next day, Sikaffy agreed to pay the hit man \$300,000 and 10 kilos of cocaine for carrying out the assassination, according to an FBI agent's affidavit.

On Oct. 28, 1984, the first part of the plot was carried out. A Cessna plane, laden with 15 duffel bags carrying 760 pounds of cocaine, landed at a remote airfield in central Florida. FBI agents were waiting. Over the next week all of the plotters were arrested; Bueso, who was in Chile at the time, was arrested there.

William Webster, director of the FBI, told the press, "We don't want international terrorists to establish beachheads or bases for oper-

ations in the United States such as they have enjoyed for years in other parts of the world."

Facing extradition from Chile, Bueso voluntarily returned to Miami in November 1985. He was charged and released on \$50,000 bail. He was not charged with any narcotics-related offenses, and his lawyer has denied that he knew anything about any drug deal aspect of the plot.

However, one of Bueso's conversations heard on the FBI wiretaps had piqued the interest of federal investigators. The conversation occurred eight days before the cocaine arrived in the United States. Bueso called one of his fellow plotters in Miami asking for the whereabouts of Faiz Sikaffy.

"I have some things ready but it is on a timetable," Bueso was recorded as saying. "If he does not come on Tuesday that thing is [expletive]."

"Uh . . . the fish? . . . the fish flour?" his associate stammered.

"No . . . the fish flour, yes," Bueso said. "The fish flour, I think that they have it," the other plotter replied. "Uh, they are going

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to obtain a letter of credit. That's what he was telling me."

Then the conversation turned to the planning of the assassination in Honduras.

"Our assessment was that there was insufficient evidence to join him [Bueso] in the narcotics indictment," says one federal prosecutor familiar with the case. "From our perspective we often have that feeling that a defendant had to have known [about drug trafficking] but in Bueso's case we couldn't prove it. He was certainly an active player in the plans."

There is no evidence that North knew about the plot while it was taking place in 1984. But it is known that Bueso was actively seeking special treatment from Washington officials by the spring of 1986. That was when Bueso entered into a plea bargain agreement with federal prosecutors in Miami. He pleaded guilty to two felony counts of traveling in furtherance of a conspiracy. His lawyer asked for a delay in sentencing so that he could consult with "several highly placed officials" in Washington who were working on aid to the contras.

At his sentencing hearing in July 1986,